

Municipalities and citizens movement defeat anti-democratic EU directive

Trade unions and other social movements, city councilors, municipalities, regional councils and even some governments can now claim victory over a proposal tabled by the European Commission in January 2017.

The proposed Notification Procedure directive would have given the Commission veto powers over rules and regulations tabled in the area of services, and it has been clear from the beginning, that it would affect areas such as child care, public services, city planning and labour rights at all levels of government – from the very local to the national level. In a vast and sensitive area of the economy, the Commission claimed the right to scrutinize draft laws well before they were adopted, to change them and to have them repealed should they be adopted in a form not in sync with strict market disciplines.

Luckily, this frontal attack on democracy was not accepted by some member states, nor by important municipalities and a broad coalition of citizens' movements. In the end, the negotiations between governments in the Council have led to nothing – with some governments opposing the thrust of the proposal - and the European Parliament has abandoned the dossier. It will only be a threat again if the new Commission that takes office end of 2019 decides to retable the proposal.

The directive surfaced after years of pressure from big business lobby groups to have the Commission secure a more forceful implementation of the Services Directive. The directive, also known as the Bolkestein Directive, covers a broad range of services and introduces far reaching rules that have serious implications for welfare, environmental policies and social rights. It is also vaguely worded, in part as an outcome of strong protests at the time of its adoption in 2006. This leads to lack of clarity, a space for interpretation which business lobby groups want to solve in an easy manner: to award the institution it trusts the most to look at the matters in a single-minded manner with veto powers.

While it is good news the proposed directive, which was fundamentally at odds with democracy, now has to be abandoned, it will remain as an indication of just how far the European Commission and its allies are prepared to go in their attempts to enforce their neoliberal ideology.

Still, there is reason to believe this is not the final word in the matter. New initiatives will be taken at the EU level to impose stricter disciplines at the local level to ensure market discipline. The victory against the Notification Procedure directive, then, should serve as a wake-up call to all those who care for local democracy to join forces and identify ways of defending the right to make decisions to defend and expand welfare, to secure public services for all and to form cities according to the wishes of those who live in them.

After the failure of the Notification Procedure directive, it is time for a public debate on how ensure that the European Commission gets clear instructions to once and for all halt its crusade anti-

democratic deregulation of European societies. The coming weeks in the run-up to the European Parliament elections are the perfect time for such a debate.